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TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL VIETNAMESE MENNONITE PASTOR CONVICTED IN HCMC

REF: A) HCMC 823; B) HCMC 232; C) HCMC 1388

1. (SBU) According to Pham Dinh Nhan (strictly protect), a leader of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF), an association of house church groups, in a trial the morning of November 12, the HCMC Criminal Court sentenced controversial Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang to three years imprisonment. While we have not yet seen the indictment, a June 15 diplomatic note from the HCMC External Relations Office (ERO) informed us that Quang was arrested for "instigating a disturbance of public order and systematically resisting law enforcement officers" (ref A). (This would likely make the charge "resisting persons in the performance of their official duties", article 257 of the Penal Code.) Five other members of Quang's unrecognized Mennonite Church were given sentences ranging from nine months to two years in prison on similar charges. The case stems from a March 2004 incident when Quang and several followers were involved in an altercation with plainclothes police outside Quang's residence, which doubled as a house church (ref B).

2. (SBU) In early November, the HCMC ERO denied our formal request to attend the trial, informing ConGen that attendance was not possible under Vietnamese law. We subsequently were refused entry to the court on the morning of November 12.

3. (SBU) According to Pastor Nhan, police "visited" his residence and that of other VEF leaders the evening of November 11. Nhan surmised that the police sought to prevent the VEF from organizing in advance of the trial. Late in the morning of November 12 after the police left, Pastor Nhan joined a small number of his followers outside the courthouse. Their vigil was largely peaceful except for when one of the worshipers put on a white skullcap embroidered with a cross. According to Nhan, at this point, the police approached Nhan and asked that the head covering be removed. We understand the issue was resolved peacefully.

4. (SBU) Nhan confirmed as authentic a letter dated November 5 forwarded to diplomats from contacts abroad in which he and 21 other VEF pastors called on the courts and the GVN to "immediately put a stop to slandering and smearing the good name and the human dignity of the Rev. Nguyen Hong Quang." Terming the letter "mild," Nhan said that he had not intended for the letter to become public, adding that he could not control the actions of other VEF members. Nhan said that he hoped that the letter's publication would not affect the VEF's budding dialogue with Vietnamese officials on the new legal framework on religion, due to come into effect on November 15 (ref C).

5. (SBU) Comment: Before his arrest in June, the firebrand Quang had become increasingly confrontational with local authorities. We have been encouraging our more moderate VEF contacts to strike a careful balance between supporting Quang and ensuring that they are not harmed by their association with the provocative pastor. This is particularly the case now, as our VEF contacts themselves acknowledge that the GVN -- for the first time -- is taking formal note of their concerns over the new legal framework on religion.

WINNICK